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Claiming the Victim: Tokenism, Mourning, and the Future of German Holocaust Poetry

KATHRIN BOWER

You onlookers

Under whose gaze murder takes place.

As one feels a gaze at one's back,

So you feel on your bodies

The gazes of the dead.—Nelly Sachs¹

This excerpt from Nelly Sachs's poem "You Onlookers" could be read as support for the contention, reportedly made by Adolf Hitler during a table talk, that "The Jews invented conscience."² This statement, although fascinating in itself for what it implies about Hitler's psyche and moral sense, becomes even more provocative if read in association with Marina Zwetajewa's puzzling proclamation, made famous by its appearance as an epigram to a poem by Paul Celan, that "all poets are Jews."³ The connection of Jews to both conscience and poetry has significant repercussions for the genre of so-called Holocaust lyric, so-called because it is necessary to distinguish, as is seldom done, between poems *from* the Holocaust and poems *about* the Holocaust. The poetry written from the midst of extremity is inscribed not only with the conditions of that context (the relentless specter of death, hunger, and suffering) but also the desire to overcome them: the combination of a longing for survival and a mission to bear witness was the most common motivation for writing. Poetry was the genre most accessible to the inmates of camps and ghettos not only because of its condensed form (a necessity in the atmosphere of lack of both time and resources in the camps) but also because of its affiliations with a set of traditions ranging from Jewish liturgical poetry, Yiddish folk song and German romantic lyric that together formed a common heritage for the majority of inmates. Poems written in the camps and ghettos between 1939 and 1945 often were made part of the group's oral lore, passing between individuals and even

between camps, memorized, put to music, and transformed from a personal outburst of expression to a shared communication—the company of misery as well as encouragement to persevere by fostering a spirit of community.

Such was the nature of the Theresienstadt poems written by Ilse Weber (1903–1944), a German-speaking Czech Jew who had published Jewish children's stories and poems before the war and who continued to write both poems and songs in the camp. Her works attest to her courageous spirit but also to a strong moral sense of community and solidarity. Weber's poems were widely circulated throughout the camp and their popularity as well as the fact that they have survived while their author perished (Weber was gassed in Auschwitz together with her young son in 1944) attest to their significance for her fellow-sufferers. Alternately expressing sorrow, disillusionment, defiance, and hope, her writings speak to the complex of emotions and psychological dilemmas that grew out of the concentration camp experience. In a poem entitled "Letter to My Child," Ilse Weber reflects on the condition of loss that is both individual and collective—the atmosphere of separation and deprivation that was the context calculated by the Nazis to foment loneliness, psychological collapse, and the erasure of all that had been personal and human:

Darkness surrounding us, life a chore
they have taken all from us, left us nothing more.
House, home, not a corner where we once moved,
not a piece remained, once valued and loved.

.....
Not even our names have they left to us.
Marked like animals we go through the streets
with numbers around our necks . . . ⁴

Despite this environment, or perhaps because of it, Weber persists in her faith, and in a poem entitled "Pledge" promises an allegiance to her people that is born from a mixture of oppression, despair, and conviction:

What to my heart was dear
gradually it from me was torn.
And yet to me today it is clear—
I would not of my Judaism be shorn.
Adept with words am I not,
and cannot use words to impart,
what in me burns like a fire hot
the feeling for my people in my heart.
And if one asked me to win or lose,
I would not think of pain or rue
But rather new torments would I choose
And to my people be true.⁵

Yet the spectrum is not complete, the appeal of Weber's words to her fellow inmates not fully apparent, without a reference to the touching simplicity and seemingly ingenuous tone of hope that also imbues her writing. In "Then Everything Will Be All Right," Weber indulges in fantastical conciliatory visions of salvation and brotherhood that will follow if her people manage to weather the trials of the camp experience. Most poignant and startling is the longing for reconciliation with the oppressor, and the clinging to a lost ideal of home that is somehow preserved intact and will one day be miraculously restored:

Then ends the hate, the greed, and the enmity,
and all suffering comes to an end;
"my brother" says to you then your enemy
and full of shame gives you his hand,
.....

For you the sun shines, for you the trees leaves bear,
you again have brothers and a place;
the evil vanishes like an awful nightmare,
and once more life showers you with grace,
then everything will be all right, everything will be fine
endure the waiting and pardon,
trust in the future, don't veer from that line:
the world will again be a garden!⁶

But how was Weber's work received after the war, after the smoke and ashes had revealed the extent of the damage to Western conceptions of humanity, morality, and conscience? The context had changed, there was a shift from the immediacy of survival to the mediation of guilt and shame and for this the simple, sometimes clumsy rhymes of much of the camp poetry seemed inappropriate or inadequate, while it nevertheless embodied the very voices whose existence had been brutally and prematurely extinguished. Not the voices of martyrs or beings made sublime by their suffering, but the voices of ordinary people—where the banality of suffering collided with the banality of evil. This was not the kind of message that post-Holocaust Germany sought or wanted, but rather one it strove to escape. It is interesting therefore to note that Weber's Theresienstadt poems, though some did appear in isolation in anthologies, were first printed as a collection in Israel in 1964 and did not find a publisher in Germany until 1991. The poetry of the camps was at best briefly celebrated as, in Ludvík Václavěk's words, "documentary lament"⁷—traces of this legacy were collected in anthologies, but many manuscripts were abandoned to the archives and the majority of these writings was ultimately dismissed as a woeful failure to approximate in language the effects of unrepeatable and unspeakable experience.

This dismissive attitude toward camp and ghetto poetry was in part engendered by judgments made by the survivors themselves, here most notably H. G. Adler, whose study of the concentration camp Theresienstadt is at once sympathetic to the suffering of the inmates and contemptuous of their poetic outpourings. Referring to the lyric produced in the camp as largely symptomatic of what he termed the "Theresienstadt rhyming sickness,"⁸ Adler then cites excerpts from several of Weber's poems in order to illustrate the nature and quality of Theresienstadt poetry:

In this irritatingly helpless style, shaken by horror, empathy, fear and desperation, lay people and some writers attempted to address quotidian questions of the concentration camp experience. By writing these impressions down, they sought to console themselves and their public and to at least temporarily free themselves from the relentless onslaught of evil.⁹

Roughly contemporary with Adler's study on Theresienstadt, Hannah Arendt's book *The Human Condition* (1958) includes a section in which Arendt discusses the relevance of poetry to human history, arguing that the poem represents a kind of memory capsule, a vessel of remembrance that utilizes mnemonic strategies in its form in the service of the preservation of its content.¹⁰ The combination of this conception of the poem as a kind of condensed archive and testimonial to history, and the fear that with the extinction of the victims' voices the public awareness of the Holocaust itself was in danger of extinction, served as the driving force behind the anthology projects of the 1960s. Pangs of conscience and the desire to atone for the immediate past may have inspired the publication of poetry by inmates and survivors in the early postwar years, but by the 1950s this remorse had been displaced by a growing complacency in part encouraged by material indulgence. Manfred Schlösser's 1960 collection, *Written to the Wind*, brings together the works of camp and ghetto poets as well as poems by exile writers. Schlösser closed the preface to his volume with a statement that reveals the dual intent of his collection, to preserve these writings both against forgetting and against the elitist judgments of the critics: "May this anthology be an initial step in the rehabilitation of this often forgotten poetry. And to the professional critics, finally, a word of warning from Karl Kraus: whoever now has something to say, let him step forward and be silent."¹¹ A similar collection, incorporating much of the same material but including anti-fascist works by contemporary German Democratic Republic poets, was published in East Germany in 1968: *What Word Called Into the Cold*, edited by Heinz Seydel. The Mitscherlichs' psychosocial study of 1967 brought the question of mourning and identity into the German public consciousness, at least in intellectual circles, but their bleak conclusions on postwar Germany's inability

to mourn could not provoke the empathy necessary to achieve it. Without either a sense of loss or a sense of involvement, there is no psychic space for the work of mourning. This points to yet another complication in the reception of Holocaust poetry, where the emphasis has been on a select set of lyrical representatives chosen as mouthpieces of the Jewish fate and mascots of morally conscious memory rather than on the full spectrum of writing that was inspired by the experience and witness of extremity.

In the Germany of the 1960s and early 1970s, Nelly Sachs's poetry assumed a status as the token of German mourning—to a degree that could almost be viewed as the co-optation of her writing as a substitute for the work of mourning that was otherwise not being done in the German language. Hailed as *the* poet of Jewish fate during her lifetime and still today viewed by critics such as Gert Mattenklott as “a medium of the victims,”¹² Sachs and her poetic testimonies to the victims of the Holocaust became enmeshed in the vicissitudes of German memory politics, with reception alternating between recognition (as profoundly moving tributes to a catastrophic past) and rejection (as sentimental, mannerist, and distinctly unmodern attempts to represent the unrepresentable).

In the years immediately after the war, Nelly Sachs was unable to find a West German publisher for her first collection, *In the Residences of Death*, although she made valiant and persistent attempts. She was grateful and relieved when Aufbau in East Berlin agreed to print her collection in 1947. After this first volume met with a notable lack of popular resonance (although it did receive some critical attention), Sachs had to go outside of Germany to find a publisher for her next collection, which was printed in Amsterdam in 1949. By the latter half of the 1950s, however, Sachs's works were being printed in Germany, where her third volume of poetry, *And No One Knows Further*, was published in Hamburg in 1957. Still she complained bitterly in her letters that she despaired of ever finding a permanent home for her work in Germany. The resonance of Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Merkur* article of 1959—in which he argued that Nelly Sachs's work refuted Adorno's dictum against poetry after Auschwitz and proclaimed her to be the “greatest poet . . . writing in German today”¹³—signaled the beginning of an upswing of interest, accolades, and awards for the poet in the 1960s culminating in the Nobel Prize of 1966.

After the time of recognition following the Nobel Prize had passed, however, and then most clearly after the poet's death in 1970, there was a shift in reception from praise to criticism, from a celebration of Sachs's verse as representative of the Jewish fate and an appeal to universal moral conscience to a derogatory attitude toward her lyric as archaic, unrealistic, and sentimental. Many critics began to insinuate that the prizes she had been awarded were more

representative of German guilt than of her poetic prowess. Nor was she really regarded as a “German” poet: the label “poet of the *Jewish* fate” stuck. Sachs was in a sense both elevated and isolated as the representative of the Jewish victims and German-Jewish reconciliation, on the one hand acting as a balm on the German conscience, but on the other never being truly accepted as a German poet. The dubious limelight she had briefly enjoyed as a mascot of memory faded as quickly as it had once flashed, and it is only recently that Sachs’s works are again beginning to be seriously addressed and reread in scholarly studies.

What the cases of Ilse Weber and Nelly Sachs illustrate is that the assessment of poetry written in response to the Holocaust must be mediated, on the one hand, by a recognition of the set of expectations we bring to these texts as post-Holocaust readers, and on the other hand, an acknowledgement of the context in which those words were written. Further, it is necessary to remain conscious of the fact that the event of the writing and the socio-historical positionality of each new reading are both embedded in an ongoing process of memory, and that our own discourse and readerly expectations exert an influence on our understanding of the past as well as our ability to determine the future. The shift in emphasis in Holocaust literary studies from documentation to representation has implications not only for the way in which we remember the past, but also threatens to further obscure the “authentic” voices of witness and their testimonies.

But where do we draw the line between canonization and preservation, between confrontation and reparation, commemoration and actual remembrance? I am referring here to the contemporary phenomenon in representations of the Holocaust, where a discursive fascination with memory has become a substitute for the work of memory itself, and assumed a degree of dominance and control over the past in the present that recalls Foucault’s claims about the history of sexuality wherein loquacity and a profusion of confessionality were in inverse relation to actual freedom and emancipation.¹⁴ In terms of the Holocaust, many official commemorations come across as self-serving gestures of buying a place among the righteous—as substitute acts of moral conscience that do not necessarily reflect conviction, but rather grow out of externally imposed expectations for public displays of mourning and remembrance that are themselves intertwined with political motives. Ingeborg Bachmann’s admonition in an unfinished essay, where she alludes to the potential for manipulation of the victims’ memory and “name” in order to justify ends in the present, has become all too pertinent to the current commodification and appropriation of the Holocaust: “It is not true that the victims admonish, testify or bear witness

for something. That is one of the most terrible and thoughtless, and weakest poeticizations. . . . No one can call upon the victim. It is misuse. No country and no group, and no idea is allowed to call upon its dead.”¹⁵

Willi Brandt's fall to his knees in front of the Warsaw memorial in 1970 may have been moved by genuine sorrow and shame, but much of the ceremony that followed was carefully scripted in an ever more rehearsed and thus superficial rhetoric of mourning and remembrance. Post-Holocaust poetry has become both yet another realm in which this ritual of remembrance takes place *and* an arena in which the character of the German “work of mourning” is questioned and its underlying hypocrisy and cynicism criticized. This tone of critique comes out in the works of both Jewish and non-Jewish poets: in the sarcasm and bitter humor of Erich Fried's lyrical sound bites, in the scathing observations of Bertolt Brecht, the disturbing poetic revelations of Ingeborg Bachmann, and in the many and varied contemporary manifestations of conscience expressed via the poetic word. If indeed the Jews invented conscience, then that legacy is being carried on in the medium of so-called Holocaust poetry, although not always in reference to the Holocaust as a lived historical event. But the increasingly metaphorical quality of the Holocaust in literature and its exploitation as a trope of suffering and existential angst gives rise to questions about the future of Holocaust literature and the fate of the voices of those victims who have been doubly silenced, first by death, and then by the din of a discourse of inexpressibility and laments over the limits of language. In the contemporary effusion of words about the rupture and fracture of language there is an observable fetishization of the signifier over the signified, a fascination with tropability in an ethereal realm of aesthetic abstraction, that threatens to obscure the real victims' legacy through a new game of smoke and mirrors.

By codifying the conviction that, as Nelly Sachs once wrote, “Silence is the dwelling place of the victims,”¹⁶ Holocaust literary scholarship has proclaimed speech an impossibility (thereby denying the victims a conventional voice) while simultaneously privileging a certain kind of language, a poetics of horror, fragmentation, and silence for which Paul Celan has been celebrated ever since Adorno's proclamation in his *Aesthetic Theory*: “Celan's poetry seeks to express the most extreme horror through silence.”¹⁷ This concentration on silence and its representations points to the increasingly self-referential nature of Holocaust literary studies. But the fixation on the opposition between language and silence is gradually being displaced by a growing concern—at times bordering on obsession—with memory. The future of Holocaust studies will be determined by whether the burgeoning discourse *about* mourning and memory vis-à-vis the Holocaust is accepted and acknowledged as a displacement of

“true” *Trauerarbeit* as the discourse of mourning, and whether we regard this displacement as a natural and necessary step in the evolutionary process of remembrance. We must also continue to ask ourselves what we are talking about when we talk about Holocaust poetry: the testimonies to an event that we will never fully comprehend, or the resonances and implications this catastrophe has had for moral conscience and language, or whether there is a means of mediating this opposition. In the end, what we perhaps most need to ask ourselves is not whether there is a right or wrong way to engage with this past, but rather that no matter what form it takes, a conscious and self-reflective concern with the Holocaust as event, representation, or resonance is in any case preferable to its submersion in the amnesic wake of history.

NOTES

1. Nelly Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), 20. All translations from the German are mine.

2. Quoted by George Steiner in his essay “The Long Life of Metaphor,” in Berel Lang, ed., *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 164.

3. Quoted in Russian in Paul Celan, *Gedichte I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975), 287.

4. Ilse Weber, *Theresienstadt* (Tel Aviv: Mafil, 1964), 21.

5. *Ibid.*, 50ff.

6. *Ibid.*, 107–108.

7. Ludvík Václavek, “Deutsche Lyrik im Ghetto Theresienstadt 1941–1945,” *Weimarer Beiträge* 5 (1982): 26. Václavek applies this phrase specifically to the works of Ilse Weber, but it could be extended as a designation of the tone and form that characterizes much of the poetry written in the camps and ghettos.

8. H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941–1945: Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft*, orig. 1955 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960), 617. Cf. also Zdenek Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, trans. K. Weisskopf (London: Edward Goldston & Son, Ltd., 1953), 128f.

9. *Ibid.*, 619.

10. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 169–170.

11. Manfred Schlösser, ed., *An den Wind geschrieben. Lyrik der Freiheit 1933–1945* (Darmstadt: Agora, 1960), 20.

12. Gert Mattenklott, “Zur Darstellung der Shoa in deutscher Nachkriegsliteratur,” *Jüdischer Almanach* (1993): 32.

13. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Steine der Freiheit,” *Merkur* 13 (1959): 770–775.

14. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980). Michael Geyer and Miriam Hansen offer a similar thesis that the discourse of memory was a means of controlling or appropriating memory in postwar Germany. In their essay “German-Jewish Memory and National Consciousness,” they refer to “a near total usurpation of memory—every kind of memory—by the post-war state and its institutions” because, in fact, “there was no public space or

collective language for memory experience. Memory remained private or marginal . . . or it was state-sponsored and institutional." *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 185–186.

15. Ingeborg Bachmann, "Auf das Opfer darf keiner sich berufen," *Werke* (Munich: Piper, 1978), 4: 335.

16. Nelly Sachs, *Suche nach Lebenden* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), 70.

17. Theodor W. Adorno, "Paralipomena," in his *Ästhetische Theorie, Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), 7: 477.